

## *Human Stories of the U.S. Coast Guard*

### **LCDR Holly Harrison: Guardian, Veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Bronze Star Recipient**

As with any meaningful career, that of LCDR Holly R. Harrison reflects her hard work and devotion to duty. This native of Arizona comes from a military family tracing its connection to the nation's armed services back several generations. Early in life, LCDR Harrison continued her family's tradition of service to country, gaining hands-on experience with Coast Guard units while still in high school. She spent a year in college working hard to fulfill her dream of entrance into and graduation from the Coast Guard Academy.



*Lt. Holly Harrison on board USS Milius.*

After completing four years at the Academy, Harrison received a variety of shipboard assignments, including ones on Storis (WMEC-38), and the 110-foot cutters Kiska (WPB-1336) and Aquidneck (WPB-1309). A World War II-era cutter famous for making the Northwest Passage in 1957, Storis proved an excellent vessel on which to learn to drive ships. Harrison served as an ensign on Storis in the stormy Bering Sea and boarded numerous fishing vessels in support of the cutter's law enforcement mission. Next, Harrison transferred to Hilo, Hawaii, to serve as executive officer on board the 110-foot patrol boat Kiska, which performed a variety of missions in the mid-Pacific area. Harrison served on board Kiska for two years before later receiving command of her own cutter, the WPB Aquidneck homeported out of Fort Macon, North Carolina.

Near the end of 2002, after well over a year in command of Aquidneck, Harrison received orders to the Northern Arabian Gulf (NAG) to take part in Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF). Harrison had to cancel an assignment to escort vessels in the Delaware River, return Aquidneck to homeport to load spare parts, and steam for the Integrated Support Center-Portsmouth, in Hampton Roads, Virginia. In Portsmouth, Harrison spent over two months preparing the cutter and crew for deployment to the Middle East. These preparations included rigorous training in small arms and chemical, biological and radiological warfare. Harrison and her crew also prepared Aquidneck for trans-Atlantic

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shipment on board a Military Sealift Command ship. Trans-shipment of Aquidneck and three other 110-foot cutters required a great deal of logistical work and by January 2003, the four WPBs were ready to load onto the commercial heavy-lift motor vessel Industrial Challenger.

Harrison and her crew boarded a chartered jet for Bahrain and touched down on February 26. Shortly after arriving, Harrison and the three other patrol boat skippers boarded USS Valley Forge, a guided missile cruiser and command ship for Task Force



*Lt. Harrison's Aquidneck on patrol around the Gulf oil platforms.*

55, under which the cutters would operate. Task force commander, U.S. Navy captain John W. Peterson, had specifically requested use of the patrol boats during the September 2002 planning for OIF naval operations. Peterson and

his staff briefed the skippers on their upcoming mission and the naval combat operations about to begin.

After the patrol boats arrived in Bahrain, the work tempo increased. Within ten days of Harrison's arrival, M/V Industrial Challenger delivered Aquidneck and the other 110s after a thirty-five day passage. On March 5, a heavy-lift crane off-loaded the cutters and Harrison and her crew conducted sea trials for the next two days. On March 8, they stowed stores on board Aquidneck boat and, on March 9, the patrol boat sailed to the Northern Arabian Gulf (NAG) with sister ship Adak. Once the two cutters arrived, they began maritime interdiction operations, boarding and inspecting indigenous watercraft that navigated the waters along coastal Iraq.

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During March, Coalition naval forces restricted the flow of Iraqi watercraft along the Khawr Abd Allah (KAA) Waterway, the primary maritime link between Iraq and the Gulf. Naval planners believed that these dhows and other watercraft might hold mines, weapons or escaping Iraqi officials. The Iraqi watercraft countered Coalition efforts by staging breakouts, which involved dozens of watercraft trying to escape simultaneously. These attempts included a large breakout of sixty dhows on March 17. Aquidneck worked together with the other WPBs and an HH-65 helicopter from high-endurance cutter Boutwell to corral the watercraft and board each of them. Together, they managed to inspect all the vessels and found no weapons, illegal cargoes or Iraqi officials.

In the evening of March 20, Operation Iraqi Freedom's combat operations began as Coalition warships launched Tomahawk missiles toward Baghdad. Aquidneck patrolled around the naval vessels during launch operations to screen them from intruders. The missile launches proved an awesome sight and none of the off-watch crew could sleep. Harrison was unaware of the fact that, as captain of Aquidneck, she had become the first woman to command a Coast Guard vessel in a combat zone.

The next day, Aquidneck remained on patrol in the NAG. Early in the morning, a lookout on board the cutter spotted a British Royal Navy Sea King helicopter approach while another Sea King vectored in from the opposite direction. To the amazement of the crew, the two helicopters collided in mid-air and exploded on impact. Aquidneck reacted immediately and appeared at the site of the disaster before any other Coalition vessel. As jet fuel burned on the water's surface surrounding the wreckage, Aquidneck launched its small boat and commenced search operations; however, all of the seven helicopter crewmembers, including an American navy officer, died in the crash.



*A WPB on patrol in the Northern Arabian Gulf.*

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After Coalition naval forces wrapped up the initial phases of combat operations, naval planners focused on opening the KAA Waterway to vessel traffic. On March 22, Aquidneck joined the escort detailed to protect Coalition minesweeping vessels clearing a channel to the Iraqi port of Umm Qasr. In order to do this, Aquidneck and the other escorts had to navigate upstream of the minesweepers. This mission proved to be a stressful one because the Harrison's crew realized that they were sailing through unswept waters and that the thin-skinned cutter could be torn apart by a floating mine. This mission concluded successfully with no casualties to the minesweepers or their escorts, but later analysis indicated that Aquidneck had passed through water that held active mines.

Aquidneck performed numerous patrol missions to safeguard Iraqi oil platforms. On several of these patrols, Iranian gunboats would appear, test Harrison and her crew's reactions, and gauge the capabilities of Aquidneck. Harrison had to draw a fine line between responding assertively while not provoking hostilities. Harrison chose the middle ground of having the crew ready to man the cutter's loaded guns without training any weapons on the Iranian vessels. Whenever the Iranian vessels appeared in Aquidneck's patrol area, Harrison paralleled their course and matched their speed, sometimes exceeding thirty knots to do so. Harrison made sure her cutter did not present a threatening posture, but she never backed down and the Iranian gunboats always broke off these encounters and retreated to their territorial waters.

Securing the KAA Waterway for regular commercial traffic required not just minesweeping operations, but the clearing of other obstacles as well. Wrecks and hulks of destroyed ships dating back as far as the Iran-Iraq War dotted the KAA Waterway's shoreline. Armed boarding teams from the WPBs had to clear the shoreline of any potential threats hidden within these wrecks. During these operations, a boarding team from Aquidneck discovered military supplies within the hulk of a tanker, including Iraqi military uniforms, money, AK-47s, fresh food and drawings of Coalition naval vessels. Aquidneck's shore parties also secured a number of coastal bunkers that proved inaccessible to land forces.

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While serving as Aquidneck's captain, Holly Harrison's cutter and dedicated crew conducted innumerable maritime interdiction, search and rescue, escort and combat-related operations in the Northern Arabian Gulf. In 2003, Harrison received recognition



*Lt. Holly Harrison receives the Bronze Star Medal with VADM James Hull looking on.*

of Aquidneck's for these achievements under her command. She became the first female member of the service to receive the Bronze Star medal in addition to her record as the first woman to command a Coast Guard cutter in combat.

After re-deployment to the United States, Harrison transferred to the Maritime Law Enforcement School, in Yorktown, Virginia, and put her rich boarding experience to use as a senior instructor. She moved with the school to Charleston, South Carolina, to help establish the Coast Guard's law enforcement academy in that city. Following her teaching work in Yorktown and Charleston, she served for two years as executive officer of the medium-endurance cutter Legare, which performed several drug interdiction and illegal migrant patrols in the Caribbean. Today, she serves as a program reviewer at Coast Guard Headquarters in Washington, D.C.

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